

VZCZCXYZ0015
PP RUEHWEB

DE RUEHAS #0619/01 1231138
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
P 031138Z MAY 07
FM AMEMBASSY ALGIERS
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 3552
INFO RUEHBP/AMEMBASSY BAMAKO 0157
RUEHLO/AMEMBASSY LONDON 1593
RUEHMD/AMEMBASSY MADRID 8547
RUEHFR/AMEMBASSY PARIS 2165
RUEHRB/AMEMBASSY RABAT 1745
RUEHTU/AMEMBASSY TUNIS 6579
RUEHCL/AMCONSUL CASABLANCA 2949

C O N F I D E N T I A L ALGIERS 000619

SIPDIS

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 05/02/2017
TAGS: PGOV PHUM KDEM AG
SUBJECT: OFFICIAL ELECTION PERIOD UNDERWAY BUT DOES ANYONE CARE?

REF: A. ALGIERS 338

¶B. ALGIERS 330

Classified By: Ambassador Robert Ford for reasons 1.4 (b, d).

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: In advance of the May 17 legislative elections, free electronic media access is now available to qualified Algerian political parties and independent candidates, signaling that the official national legislative election has begun. The parties generally express satisfaction with the way the media spots on radio and television are being edited and aired. The government has set up an election commission with political parties comprising the bulk of its membership. The ambassador met a vice president of the commission April 30 and urged that the commission do all it can to ensure the credibility of the election process and hence the democratic opening in Algeria. That same day, however, the commission's director publicly admitted that the commission lacks any legal authority to stop election administrators from cheating. One good embassy contact from the governing coalition expressed concern that a clause in ballot counting instructions opened a loophole for making such counts at central locations and not at the polling places, as Algerian law stipulates. As of May 2, the troublesome clause no longer appears in the document as posted on the election web site, and we are continuing to monitor the administration's compliance with the Algerian election law. Other political parties have raised different problems with us. Islah party members loyal to firm government critic and Islamist Abdallah Djaballah were largely excluded from the ballot when they sought to join a new party or seek office as independents. A secular opposition party, the RCD, complained to us that the Interior Ministry banned from its candidate lists an activist who had openly criticized the government for depositing large sums of public funds in the now-defunct Khalifa Bank. So far the election campaign itself is mostly a yawn, especially as the (evenly administered) TV coverage shows little but clips of dull speeches offering little criticism of the government. We see three questions developing around these elections. First, as many observers here note, the turnout may itself be a vote of sanction if the Algerian public is disinterested in the political process itself. Second, the neutrality of the electoral administration is open to question. Lastly, no one among our contacts really knows whether the FLN or the RND will win as these two party leaderships seek better position in advance of the post-Bouteflika jockeying many anticipate after the elections. The good conduct of the election administration is open to question, and so is, not surprisingly, voter turnout itself. End Summary.

ELECTION COMMISSION - TO WHAT END?

¶2. (U) The Algerian Government last week established the national electoral commission whose membership comprises representatives of 24 political parties and also includes four independent candidates. The four independents were selected by lottery, whereas the political parties were invited to select their participant. The 29th person on the commission is its president, Said Bouchair. Political parties tell us Bouchair is independent-minded, well respected, and a good appointment by President Bouteflika. Bouchair is the former head of the Algerian Constitutional Court. Bouchair acknowledged to the Algerian media earlier this week that the commission lacks judicial authority to reverse instances of fraud committed by agents of the state in the election process. He instead simply called for state administrators to remain neutral and for political parties to organize themselves to be able to observe all polling stations. A May 3 column by widely read columnist Mustafa Hammouche in Liberte noted that Bouchair had washed his hands of the election process and was hardly inspiring confidence in its good conduct. (Note: In a clear sign of his independence, Bouchair has told us by telephone that he will meet the Ambassador only if he gets permission from the Foreign Ministry, and the MFA so far is blocking us. End note.)

LIGHTS, CAMERA, ACTION

¶3. (U) The official campaign period for the May 17 national parliamentary elections opened April 26, the day free electronic media access became available to candidates under Algerian law. Until May 14, political parties and selected independent candidates are entitled to five or, in some cases, ten minutes of free daily access to government-controlled Algerian television and radio, to use as they see fit. The ten-minute slots are determined by lottery, as is the time of day the media access occurs. A party can thus win a ten-minute slot but find itself relegated to non-peak viewing times. A party's total allotted media access during the campaign is limited according to a formula that takes into account how many ballots the party appears on in the 48 wilayas (provinces) and six overseas electoral districts (corresponding to eight seats, half of which are selected by Algerians living in France). Only the three political parties belonging to the presidential coalition -- the National Liberation Front (FLN), the National Rally for Democracy (RND), and the Movement for a Society at Peace (MSP) -- have qualified candidate lists in every wilaya and each overseas district. Some independent candidates also receive free broadcast time, as determined by lottery.

¶4. (C) Campaign spots air on state radio and television channels from 0600-0700, 1200-1300 and 1800-2000, and on radio only from 2200-2300. The parties are required to tape their spots 48 hours in advance in the presence of a member of the national electoral commission. The commission members who observe the taping rotate according to an agreed-upon schedule and ensure that candidates do not tape spots that include statements that are against the constitution, criticize officials by name (criticism by title is permitted), or otherwise engage in behavior inconsistent with the law. A vice president of Bouchair's commission told Amb and Poloff on April 30 that the commission had required one party leader - a presidential candidate in 2004, he noted - to change his television address because of improper criticisms. The Ambassador told him that we hoped the commission would help foster a genuine political debate and thus generate real interest in the elections themselves. (Comment: the French language told us the 2004 candidate involved was a man, and looking at the lists the man who was

censored was clearly RCD leader Said Sadi. Interestingly, the commission vice president - a long-time embassy contact - was nervous throughout our twenty minute meeting and quickly excused himself. End Comment.)

¶5. (C) In addition to this receiving time to air speeches, parties and independent candidates receive 45 seconds of air time during television and radio newscasts to show "party meetings or events." The parties or independent candidates have free rein in editing their material, provided the commission doesn't find anything unlawful in the presentation. Following the airing of the tape, a commentator (an employee of the state broadcast media) offers 45 seconds of "commentary and analysis," which political party representatives tell us is usually bland and neutral.

EARLY CONCERNS ABOUT THE BALLOTTING PROCESS

¶6. (C) Under current Algerian election law, the old practice of the police and military voting in "special bureaus" has been abandoned. These groups will vote in May at the polling place assigned to their home, like any other citizen. Political party representatives we spoke to unanimously agreed that this change was an improvement; roving polling stations in previous years had been a major source of controversy. On May 17 itself, the electoral law requires that five political party representatives be allowed to observe the balloting at each polling station. In cases where more than five parties express interest in observing a given location, five are selected by lottery. As a practical matter, only the FLN and RND have told us they can come close to monitoring all the approximately 44,000 polling places in Algeria. The executive director of MSP, Noureddine Ait Messaoudene, told us April 28 that his party would provide coverage at close to 40,000 of the polling stations.

¶7. (C) Ait Messaoudene (protect) said the biggest concern of all political parties (other than the predominant FLN) was that the 48 wilayas might carry out a recent instruction issued by the Ministry of Interior that all ballots be counted at a central location in each wilaya. In recent

elections, political party representatives have received a tally of the results at each polling place as a check against fraud. (Note: Algerian electoral law requires that all ballots be counted and certified at the polling place. End note.) Moving the ballot counting to a central location in each wilaya, he observed, would negate this check on the authorities and not conform to the law. Ait Messaoudene told us the parties were protesting this "change" to the Ministry of Interior, but not via the media. He said ultimately a wilaya could decide not to follow the directive, in the event the political parties are do not sway Interior to rescind it, but he thought such bravery was doubtful in the Algerian system.

¶8. COMMENT: We reviewed on May 2 the Interior Ministry document the parties brought to our attention and found it to be consistent with instructions in previous years on balloting procedures. Interestingly, the copy of the document we reviewed, posted on an Algerian government web site, does not appear to be the same one that gave Ait Messaoudene cause for concern in late April. It appears to have been amended in the interim, but we are continuing to monitor electoral procedures for consistency with Algerian law. END COMMENT.

OPPOSITION PARTIES, EXCEPT ISLAH, GENERALLY SATISFIED

¶9. (C) Islah ("Reform") party MP Lakhdar Benkhellaf told us April 30 that the local authorities in Constantine had prevented him from joining the Nature and Development Party and running on its ticket. Hence, he will not be returning to parliament. Benkhellaf said the authorities had forced a

number of traditional Islah members to resign from Islah before they could be candidates under the Nature and Development Party banner. Most of the Islah members loyal to its founder, Abdallah Djaballah, tried to run as Nature and Development Party members or independents and but could not get approval from the Interior Ministry, according to Benkhellaf. He said the government had succeeded in breaking Islah and installing Mohamed Boulahia as a fictitious leader.

¶10. (C) Tarek Mira of the predominantly ethnic-Berber Rally for Culture and Democracy Party (RCD) described the 2007 legislative election process April 28 as more fair than in previous years but declined to label it fair and transparent. He did not raise any specific complaints other than the lack of neutral, outside observers to monitor the polling stations. He noted that his party, which had a small membership, would only be able to monitor the balloting at "a relatively small number" of polling stations nationwide. Separately, RCD communications director Mouhcene Belabes complained that the Interior Ministry had stricken Abdelmadjid Azzi, a candidate for the party in the wilaya of Algiers, from the ballot. The Ministry provided no official reason. A union activist who actively advocates for the rights of retirees, Azzi's candidacy was rejected, Belabes believed, because he had been a vocal critic of government deposits at the now-defunct Khalifa Bank. Abdelhamid Boubaghia of the socialist Workers Party, in contrast to RCD, stressed to us April 28 that the Workers Party had no evidence that electoral fraud was being perpetrated, and he lauded Algeria's "currently open political process."

COMMENT

¶11. (C) In our chats with political parties, we hear general satisfaction with their media access. That said, there are plenty of questions still about the upcoming conduct of the election administration. Certainly, Bouchair's acknowledging that he lacks authority didn't help build confidence. Political humorist Amar Chawki in the May 2 edition of el Watan wondered why any citizen should bother to vote when the election process itself is so suspect. Meanwhile, public interest in the election campaign so far seems minimal. The election coverage on TV is painfully dull, with repeated spots of small parties' leaders promising to work for national unity and a better Algeria. Even the major parties' leaders who are far better known have stuck to safe themes revolving around support for President Bouteflika. This provoked an editorialist in the May 2

edition of the leading Arabic daily, el Khabar, to wonder whether there is any true political pluralism in Algeria now. A prominent FLN member conceded to the Ambassador May 2 at a reception that so far the FLN and the other parties haven't kindled much of a spark (he then scuttled away). Several weekend Algerian newspapers published May 3 headlined the lack of public interest. Liberte noted that the election itself was quote no winner end quote and that many election rallies had been canceled due to skimpy attendance. Expression meanwhile commented that the first week of campaigning had been completely flat marked by quote insipid speeches and demagogic end quote.

¶12. (C) Thus, we see three questions developing around these elections. First, as many observers here note, the turnout may itself be a vote of sanction if the Algerian public is disinterested in the political process itself. Second, the neutrality of the electoral administration is open to question. Lastly, no one among our contacts really knows whether the FLN or the RND will win as these two party leaderships seek better position in advance of the post-Bouteflika jockeying many anticipate after the elections.
FORD